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Seniors would see meal program cuts under governor's budget plan

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Unable to drive and living alone on little money, Olin Howell says he doesn't know what he'd do without the hot meals delivered daily to his home. The 88-year-old widower eats little else other than cereal.

"Along with the bills, it doesn't take long to eat up Social Security," said the Columbia resident, a heart attack survivor who says he hasn't felt well since his wife died two years ago, about the time he had to give up his license.

"This sure makes it easier on me," he said. "It's a blessing to me to know people care."

But about a quarter of the more than 20,000 senior citizens who now get the meals - along with a dose of attention from the people who deliver them - face the end of that help under Gov. Mark Sanford's proposed budget for the next fiscal year.

Sanford's office said a tight budget year, the governor's opposition to the way that meals for 5,400 of the seniors are being paid for, and misguided priorities on the part of lawmakers are to blame.

The governor actually praised the meal program when presenting his \$6.8 billion spending plan, saying it "encourages independent living for homebound adults and seniors." But he proposed setting aside only the \$895,660 that helps South Carolina get more than \$10 million for the program from the federal government. In doing that, he brushed aside a request from elderly advocates, including the lieutenant governor, to permanently put \$2.9 million in the budget so that 5,476 seniors will continue to be fed.

Joel Sawyer, spokesman for the Republican governor, said the state helps provide many elderly programs, including health care, and said leaving out the extra meals money was a "relatively small reduction" when compared to the total cost of the program.

The Lieutenant Gov.'s Office on Aging and other advocates of the meals, usually delivered five days a week, are pushing for more money, telling legislators it's far cheaper for taxpayers than the alternative.

"Spend a few dollars on the front end; save a lot of dollars on the back end. That's the conservative approach to government," Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer said last week.

Nursing home placements cost an average of \$45,000 a year, and an overnight hospital stay for people 60 and older costs Medicare about \$25,000, officials said. Lack of nourishment can cause frail elderly people to fall and end up in the hospital, said Frank Adams, spokesman for the Office on Aging.

Saving money in the long run is the least of the program's benefits for someone such as Sara Deas. The 77-year-old Columbia widow said that between a heart problem, arthritis and recuperating from a hip replacement, she can't get around well. The meals, she said, enable her to stay in the home where she's lived for more than five decades.

Linda Davis, a 62-year-old Orangeburg woman who fell backward onto a concrete floor in 2006, fracturing one wrist and crushing the other, said without the meals she would have been forced to move into a nursing home as she recovered. With casts covering each arm, she could not even pick up a spoon to feed herself. Cooking was unthinkable.

"If you can give an elderly person pride and dignity to stay in their home and give them at least one meal a day, isn't it worth it?" Davis said.

The meals and daily check-in by her deliverer, who also helped her eat, allowed Davis to stay in her home of 30 years and made her feel more secure. "I knew if I fell, someone would be there at a certain time and be able to get me help," said Davis, who withdrew from the program when she recovered so her meals could go to someone who needed them more.

Through 2006, more than 15,500 South Carolinians received meals through the program. Earlier that year, lawmakers gave the Office on Aging an additional \$2.9 million in the form of a one-time payment that added the additional seniors to its ranks the following year. Lawmakers made another one-time payment of \$1.4 million last November, keeping those people on the delivery rolls, but that money will run out in June.

Making the extra funding permanent is difficult because of an economic downturn and underscores one-shot funding used by lawmakers, which is something Sanford has railed against, his spokesman said.

"This entire situation highlights the problem of paying for ongoing expenses with one-time money," Sawyer said. "The money simply isn't there. This is a very difficult budget year."

Sawyer also criticized legislators for overturning the governor's budget veto last year of \$112,000 annually for Bauer's security detail. "It's unfortunate the budget writers placed a higher priority" on that, Sawyer said.

Security for the Republican lieutenant governor is among the \$326 million Sanford cut from last year's spending in his proposed budget.

Bauer said his security should have nothing to do with the governor's proposed spending for home-delivered meals, and that people's lives should not be caught up in political infighting.

"I hope we can get past petty politics and talk about really taking care of people," he said. "It makes my skin crawl to think we're going to use this for something else."

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